

COUNTRY RETREAT

Relocating to rural Suffolk during lockdown proved to be life changing for Emma and Gavin, who created a new family home and nature-inspired guest retreat

Words **Jane Crittenden** Photography **James French** Styling **Marisha Taylor**



The extended kitchen remains sympathetic to the period architecture with outside terraces to the rear and side and a connection with the dining room.

Emma Alexander had been a north Londoner all her life and, with a hectic job in fashion retail, was beginning to feel the pull for a steadier pace of living. Her husband, Gavin Crossland, also working in fashion and a keen ultra-runner, felt a similar pull. "Neither of us had been to Southwold until Gavin ran an ultra-marathon nearby and I visited for work," Emma recalls. "Over dinner one evening we enthused about the beauty and tranquillity of the area and, within a couple of months, we'd viewed 15 properties and had our offer accepted on Toad Hall."

Tucked away down a quiet lane and surrounded by countryside, Toad Hall, which was formerly two dwellings, is about 100 years old and sits within an acre of land. The cottage is in an area of outstanding natural beauty, has glorious views and is a short drive – or 40-minute walk – from Southwold beach.

"The property had been owned by an elderly gentleman and was in challenging shape, but was such an opportunity for us," says Emma. "We came here in lockdown, thinking we'd be here for two weeks, but stayed for nine months because we all loved it so much. It's such a peaceful place to be – a real retreat from the world – and the experience changed us."

The three-bedroom cottage had all the space the family needed, but the rooms felt unbalanced: the front door opened straight into a reception room and the kitchen-diner was wide but not very deep. Upstairs, the large L-shaped main bedroom stretched from the front to the back of the house and took up far too much space.

"We wanted to create a long-term house for our daughters, Grace and Ruby, so they'd always feel like they had a home, whether on their own, with partners, or visiting in later years with their families," says Emma. "My downtime is all about cooking, so we made plans to have a beautiful open-plan entertaining space that carried on to the outside and a kitchen that worked seamlessly."

The couple reworked the layout with an architect, creating three ensuite bedrooms, turning one of the reception rooms into an entrance hall and >

The FACTS

Who? Emma Alexander, her husband Gavin Crossland, and their children, Grace, 22, and Ruby, 16

What? The renovation and extension of a Victorian cottage, plus five new-build guest lodges in the grounds

Where? Near Southwold, Suffolk

Cost? Around £500,000

Time? Two years

The open farmland views were a big draw for the couple, who fell in love with the area of Southwold after visiting by chance.

carving out a section for an office. The main transformation, however, was extending the kitchen with a pitched roof and metal-framed glazing.

"We kept the cottage's traditional appearance at the front with a dark, cosy sitting room, but we wanted the back to be bright and light and have as much glass as possible, so we could bring the outside in," Emma explains.

By the time the building work got started, the couple had fallen in love with the cottage and its location – and taken a leap of faith. They'd decided to convert the triple garage into a yoga studio, build an outside kitchen and five guest lodges. "The decision was the start of a new chapter: Gavin gave up his job and now manages Toad Hall Lodges," says Emma. "We both feel a real connection to nature here and wanted to create a retreat experience for guests."

The green window frames and doors of the lodges are mirrored inside the house, most notably in the kitchen, and the colour was inspired by the stone cottages of the Cotswolds. "We thought soft green looked lovely with the stone," Emma explains, "so went for a similar tone but with more vibrancy."

The use of green became integral to the kitchen, where the cabinetry is mostly painted in Little Greene's Boringdon Green from the National Trust collection. "Being in nature is important for our wellbeing and we wanted to bring that feeling inside," explains Emma.

For ease, Emma decided to get a handmade kitchen, designed and made by a local furniture maker. "I immediately connected with Grahame Bolton – he's a skilful furniture maker and worked with me on the door design and layout,"

she says. "The whole process felt personal and we got just what we wanted, including a second kitchen, where we hide all the noisy equipment and mess so we can have a true entertaining space."

Warm neutrals and earthy tones are the backdrop here and throughout the cottage, where plain walls are decorated with green or warm undertones. "The neutrals lean towards my love of simple Scandi design," says Emma, "but with no original period features, we decided to be more experimental than usual, bringing in interesting textures and fun, quirky textiles, art and tiles." And the reclaimed terracotta makes a statement as soon as you enter the cottage.

"When I came across the hexagonals, reclaimed from a house in France, we were both delighted, as we love interesting shapes and patterns," she says. "The look is maximalist but not in way that's busy or clashes."

Elsewhere, Emma sought out British brands such as Thomas Crapper sanitaryware and geometric textiles from Margo Selby, Linwood and House of Hackney. The radiators are also British-made, from Zehnder Charleston, with interesting finishes of textured brass, anthracite and copper.

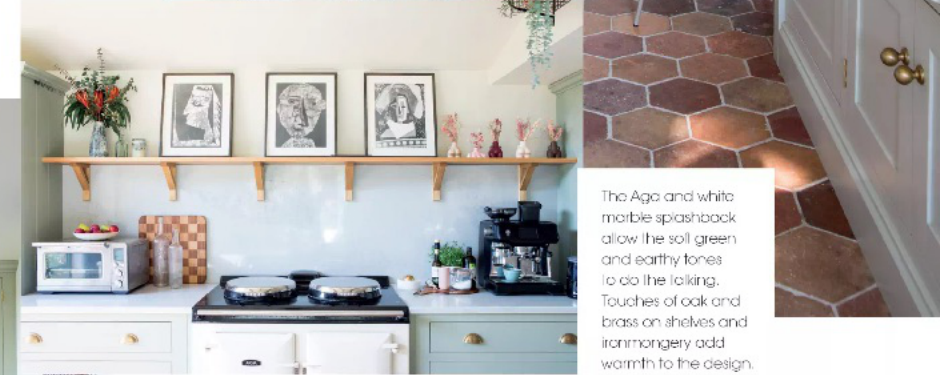
The couple's project took two years to complete and now they welcome guests to stay in the idyllic location, too. "All the changes we've made in the cottage have been about connecting us to the landscape and creating a calm, honest place to be," says Emma. "I love my kitchen the most and, with all the amazing produce from the farms around us, it just makes me want to cook, cook, cook! We feel very blessed." >

right Emma loves to entertain and the extended kitchen is her favourite room in Toad Hall.

"WE CAME IN LOCKDOWN, THINKING WE'D BE HERE FOR TWO WEEKS, BUT STAYED FOR NINE MONTHS AS WE ALL LOVED IT SO MUCH"



Emma, who loves Scandi style, has given her country kitchen a fresh, modern feel by combining pastel cabinetry with white marble surfaces and handcrafted fillings. The Quinby bar stools are from Kave.



The Ago and white marble splashback allow the soft green and earthy tones to do the talking. Touches of oak and brass on shelves and ironmongery add warmth to the design.



Toad Hall's style blends country and modern. The large ceiling height cupboard contains a mix of drawers and shelves and acts as a pantry.

"BEING IN NATURE IS IMPORTANT FOR OUR WELLBEING AND WE WANTED TO BRING THAT FEELING INSIDE"





The family lived in Suffolk for nine months during the pandemic, giving them the chance to really get to know the property and the best outdoor spots for different times of the day.

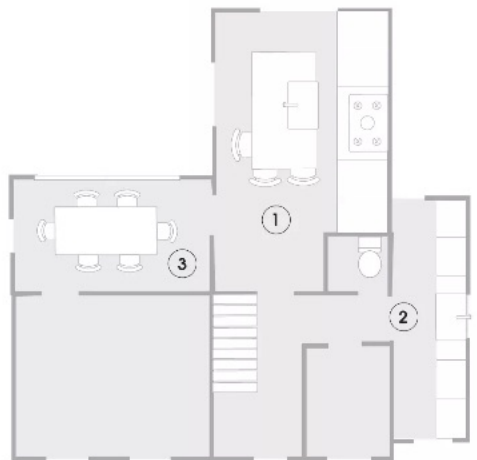
Green window and door frames painted in RAL 6021 green were a key starting point for the design of the cottage. The tap has a brushed brass finish and is from Perrin & Rowe.



Rustic wood cladding and green painted windows allow the hand-built guest lodges to blend into the natural environment.

Sourcebook

Retreat Toad Hall Lodges toadhall.life
Building contractor N&R Road Builders 07887 558452
Lodge carpenter Welwyn Carpentry welwyncarpentry.co.uk
Kitchen Grahame Bolton Kitchens gibolton.co.uk
Appliances Sago sagoappliances.com; Miele miele.co.uk; Fisher & Paykel fisherpaykel.com
Windows Craftwork Conservatories and Windows 01 502 562 835
Terracotta floor tiles Heritage Ceramics heritageceramics.co.uk
Bathroom tiles Baked Tiles bakedtiles.co.uk
Bathroom Thomas Cropper thomas-cropper.com; Bathroom One bathroomone.co.uk; Viadurini viadurini.co.uk
 For full stockist information, see page 126
 Search for more suppliers at thesotherooms.com/directory



The PLANS

- 1 The kitchen** was knocked through to the old utility room and extended out by four metres. The island is 3m by 1.1m and the Aga within easy reach; the comfortable working triangle is completed with a pantry to the right and fridge-freezer to the left.
- 2 Utility room** This acts as the working kitchen, where there's a washer-dryer, dishwasher, all the bins and the main pantry. It's also where the couple store linen for the lodges.
- 3 Dining space** The dining zone overlooks the pretty garden with terraces created by Gavin, who had no previous building experience. >



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The walls are painted in Farrow & Ball's Lime White. Trio of T sacro pendants with wattle glass, by Pooky Anais chairs and marble-top dining table, all Heal's.



SHOP THE LOOK

1 Floral Patterned Lush Mix tile, £31.19 per sq m, Porcelain Superstore porcelainsuperstore.co.uk 2 Sedge Green wood paint, £20 per 750ml, Thorndown Paints thorndown.co.uk 3 Knightsbridge Leather Sofa, £4,195, Cox & Cox coxandcox.co.uk 4 Croft Cotto Hexagon tile, £72.45 per sq m, Porcelain Superstore, as before 5 Island Breeze Large Storage Bookcase, in Farrow & Ball's Cooking Apple green, £710, The Painted Furniture Company thepaintedfurnitureco.co.uk 6 Small Yakira mirror, £225, Nkuku nkuku.com



EMMA'S WORDS OF WISDOM

- I live by the 70/30 rule; I don't procrastinate. If I'm 70 per cent certain about an idea then I'll go for it, otherwise you can drive yourself mad.
- I'd never had an Aga but I loved the look of them and I'm passionate about cooking, so I took the plunge and don't regret it. It runs on electricity, so when it's just Gavin and me here, we're energy conscious and use a small, efficient Sage worktop oven to cook.
- The cottage is in a hard water area and we wish we'd fitted a water filter during the renovations, as we're having to do it retrospectively now. **K&B**

right The vintage-style washstand came from a bathroom clearance sale. For a similar design, see the Taylor model at Viadurini.



left Country Hexagon Cotto wall tiles, from Baked Tiles. Clearwater's Formosa Grande bath, from Bathroom One.

The bedroom is painted in Farrow & Ball's Wimborne White. Tatou Suspension 1 pendant light, from Flos.

Below The couple's beloved Ligne Roset Togo leather sofa sits next to a mirror Emma covered with Linwood's Table fabric in Amala red. Gum Silk Persian rug from Dicarpet.

